

Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860" (1966)

In the following article, historian Barbara Welter looks at the antebellum decades of the nineteenth century and describes an important stage in the expression of sexual stereotypes. The idea of "The Cult of True Womanhood," or "the cult of domesticity," sought to assert that womanly virtue resided in piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. As you read, consider why these characteristics were seen as so crucial to promoting a woman's "proper role," and how such assertions about the roles of women might have served as a response to the growth of industrial capitalism.

The nineteenth-century American man was a busy builder of bridges and railroads, at work long hours in a materialistic society. The religious values of his forbears were neglected in practice if not in intent, and he occasionally felt some guilt that he had turned this new land, this temple of the chosen people, into one vast countinghouse. But he could salve his conscience by reflecting that he had left behind a hostage, not only to fortune, but to all the values which he held so dear and treated so lightly. Woman, in the cult of True Womanhood presented by the women's magazines, gift annuals, and religious literature of the nineteenth century, was the hostage in the home. In a society where values changed frequently, where fortunes rose and fell with frightening rapidity, where social and economic mobility provided instability as well as hope, one thing at least remained the same - a true woman was a true woman, wherever she was found. If anyone, male or female, dared to tamper with the complex of virtues that made up True Womanhood, he was damned immediately as the enemy of God, of civilization, and of the Republic. It was the fearful obligation, a solemn responsibility, which the nineteenth-century American woman had - to uphold the pillars of the temple with her frail white hand.

The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and her society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues - piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity... Without them.... all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power.

Religion or piety was the core of woman's virtue, the source of her strength. Young men looking for a mate were cautioned to search first for piety, for if that were there, all else would follow. Religion belonged to woman by divine right, a gift of God and nature. This "peculiar susceptibility" to religion was given her for a reason: "the vestal flame of piety, lightened up by Heaven in the breast of woman" would throw its beams into the naughty world of men. So far would the candle power reach that the "Universe might be enlightened, improved, and harmonized by Woman...."bringing the world back "from its revolt and sin..."

Caleb Atwater, Esq., writing in *The Ladies Repository*, saw the hand of the Lord in female piety: "Religion is exactly what a woman needs, for it gives her that dignity that best suits her dependence." And Mrs. John Sanford... agreed thoroughly: "Religion is just

what a woman needs. Without it she is ever restless and unhappy..." [These writers] spoke of religion as a kind of tranquilizer for the many undefined longings which swept even the most pious young girl, and about which it was better to pray than to think.

One reason religion was valued was that it did not take a woman away from her "proper sphere," her home. Unlike participation in other societies or movements, church work would not make her less domestic or submissive... In religious vineyards, said the Young Ladies' Literary and Missionary Report, "you may labor without the apprehension of detracting from the charms of feminine delicacy." Mrs. S. L. Dagg, writing from her chapter of the Society in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, was equally reassuring: "As no sensible woman will suffer her intellectual pursuits to clash with her domestic duties," she should concentrate on religious work "which promotes these very duties..."

If religion was so vital to a woman, irreligion was almost too awful to contemplate. Women were warned not to let their literary or intellectual pursuits take them away from God. Sarah Joseph Hale spoke darkly of those who... threw away the "One True Book" for others, open to error... Mrs. Hale used [these unfortunate women] as fateful proof that "the greater the intellectual force, the greater and more fatal the errors into which women fall who wander from the Rock of Salvation..."

Purity was as essential as piety to a young woman, its absence as unnatural and unfeminine. Without it she was, in fact, no woman at all, but a member of some lower order. A "fallen woman" was a "fallen angel," unworthy of the celestial company of her sex. To contemplate such loss of purity brought tears; to be guilty of such a crime, in the women's magazines, at least, brought madness or death. Even the language of flowers had bitter words for it: a dried white rose symbolized "Death preferable to the loss of innocence..."

Therefore all True Women were urged, in the strongest possible terms, to maintain their virtue, although men, being by nature more sensual than they, would try to assault it. Thomas Branagan admitted in *The Excellency of the Female Character Vindicated* that his sex would sin and sin again, but woman, stronger and purer, must not give in and let man "take liberties incompatible with her delicacy." "If you do," Branagan addressed his gentle reader, "You will be left in silent sadness to bewail your credulity, imbecility, duplicity, and premature prostitution."

If such good advice was ignored the consequences were terrible and inexorable... A popular and often reprinted story by Fanny Forester told the sad tale of "Lucy Dutton." Lucy "with the seal of innocence upon her heart, and a rose-leaf upon her cheek," came out of her vine-covered cottage and ran into a city slicker. "And Lucy was beautiful and trusting, and thoughtless... Needs the story be told- Nay.... Lucy was a child - consider how young, how very untaught - oh! Her innocence was no match for the sophistry of a gay, city youth! Spring came and shame was stamped upon the cottage at the foot of the hill." The baby died; Lucy went mad at the funeral and finally died herself... The frequency with which derangement follows loss of virtue suggests the exquisite sensibility of woman, and the possibility that, in the women's magazines at least, her

intellect was geared towards her hymen, not her brain.... If, however, a woman managed to withstand man's assaults on her virtue, she demonstrated her superiority and power over him... Men could be counted on to be grateful when women thus saved them from themselves...

In the nineteenth century, any form of social change was tantamount to an attack on woman's virtue... For example, dress reform seemed innocuous enough and the bloomers worn by the lady of that name and her followers were certainly modest attire. Such was the reasoning of only the ignorant. In an issue of *The Ladies' Wreath* a young lady is represented in dialogue with her "Professor." The girl expresses admiration for the bloomer costume - it gives freedom of motion, is healthful, and attractive. The Professor sets her straight. Trousers, he explains, are "only one of the many manifestations of that wild spirit of socialism and agrarian radicalism which is at present so rife in our land..."

Purity, considered as a moral imperative, set up a dilemma which was hard to resolve. Woman must preserve her virtue until marriage and marriage was necessary for her happiness. Yet marriage was, literally, an end to innocence. She was told not to question this dilemma, but simply to accept it.

Submission was perhaps the most feminine virtue expected of women, Men were supposed to be religious, although they rarely had time for it, and supposed to be pure, although it came awfully hard to them, but men were the movers, the doers, the actors. Women were the passive, submissive responders. The order of dialogue was of course, fixed in Heaven. Man was "woman's superior by Gods appointment..." Therefore, as Charles Elliot argued in *The Ladies' Repository*, she should submit to him "for the sake of good order at least." In *The Ladies Companion* a young wife was quoted approvingly as saying that she did not think woman should "feel and act for herself" because "When, next to God, her husband is not the tribunal to which her heart and intellect appeals - the golden bowl of affection is broken." Women were warned that if they tampered with this quality, they tampered with the order of the Universe.

Woman understood her position if she was the right kind of woman, a true woman...Put strongly by Mrs. Sandford: "A really sensible woman feels her dependence. She does what she can, but she is conscious of her inferiority and therefore grateful for support...." "True feminine genius," said Grace Greenwood, "is ever timid, doubtful, and clingingly dependent; a perpetual childhood..." Thus, "if [your husband] is abusive, never retort." A *Young Woman's Guide to the Harmonious Development of a Christian Character* suggested that females should "become as little children" and avoid "a controversial spirit..." Without comment or criticism the writer affirms that "to suffer and be silent under suffering seems to be the great command a woman has to obey..."

Domesticity was among the virtues most prized by women's magazines... Sacred Scripture re-enforced social pressure. "St. Paul knew what was best for women when he advised them to be domestic," said Mrs. Sandford. "There is composure at home; there is

something sedative in the duties which home involves. It affords security not only from the world, but from delusions and errors of every kind."

From her home woman performed her great task of bringing men back to God. The Young Ladies' Class Book was sure that the "domestic fireside is the great guardian of society against the excesses of human passions...Even if we cannot reform the world in a moment, we can begin the work by reforming ourselves and our households - it is woman's mission. Let her not look away from her own little family circle for the means of producing moral and social reforms, but begin at home..."

One of the most important functions of woman as comforter was her role as nurse...There were enough illnesses of youth and age, major and minor, to give the nineteenth century American woman nursing experience. The sickroom called for the exercise of her higher qualities of patience, mercy, and gentleness as well as her housewifely arts. She could thus fulfill her dual feminine function - beauty and usefulness...

In the home women were not only the highest adornment of civilization, but they were supposed to keep busy at morally uplifting tasks. Fortunately most of housework, if looked at in true womanly fashion, could be regarded as uplifting. Mrs. Sigourney extolled its virtues: "The science of housekeeping affords exercise for the judgment and energy, ready recollection, and patient self-possession that are the characteristics of a superior mind." According to Mrs. Farrar, making beds was good exercise, the repetitiveness of routine tasks inculcated patience and perseverance...

The female was dangerously addicted to novels, according to the literature of the period. She should avoid them, since they interfered with "serious piety." If she simply couldn't help herself and read them anyway, she should choose edifying ones from the lists of morally acceptable authors... Nineteenth century knew that girls could be ruined by the book... Books which attacked or which seemed to attack woman's accepted place were regarded as dangerous. [Women] were so susceptible to persuasion, with their "gentle yielding natures" that they might listen to the "bold ravings of the hard-featured of their own sex." The frightening result: "such reading will unsettle them for their true station and pursuits, and they will throw the world back again into confusion..."

Female seminaries were quick to defend themselves against any suspicion of interfering with the role which nature's God had assigned to women. They hoped to enlarge and deepen that role, but not to change its setting. At the Young Ladies' Seminary and Collegiate Institute in Monroe City, Michigan, the catalogue admitted few of its graduates would be likely to "fill the learned professions." Still, they were called to "other scenes of usefulness and honor." The average woman is to be the "presiding genius of love" in the home... At Miss Pierce's famous school in Litchfield, the students were taught that they had "attained the perfection of their characters when they could combine their elegant accomplishments with a turn for solid domestic virtues." Mt. Holyoke paid pious attention tribute to domestic skills: "Let a young lady despise this branch of the duties of woman, and she despises the appointments of her existence..."

If any woman asked for a greater scope for her gifts, the magazines were sharply critical. Such women were tampering with society, undermining civilization. [Such women] were condemned in the strongest possible language... "They are only semi-women, mental hermaphrodites." The Rev. Harrington knew the women of America could not possibly approve of such perversions and went to some wives and mothers to ask if they did want a "wider sphere of interest" as these nonwomen claimed. The answer was reassuring. "NO! Let the men take care of politics, we will take care of our children!" Again female discontent resulted only from a lack of understanding: women were not subservient; they were rather "chosen vessels..."

"Women's Rights" meant one thing to reformers, but quite another to the True Woman. She knew her rights.

The right to love whom others scorn
The right to comfort and to mourn.
The right to shed new joy on earth.
The right to feel the soul's high worth.
Such women's rights, and God will bless
And crown their champions with success...

But even while the women's magazines and related literature encouraged this ideal of the perfect woman, forces were at work in the nineteenth century which impelled woman herself to change, to play a more creative role in society. The movements for social reform, westward migration, missionary activity, utopian communities, industrialism, the Civil War - all called forth responses from woman which differed from those she was trained to believe were hers by nature and divine decree. The very perfection of True Womanhood, moreover, carried with it the seeds of its own destruction. For, if women were so very little less than the angels, she should surely take a more active part in running the world, especially since men were making such a hash of things...